

Old Hickory/Young Hickory



Capitol Square, Raleigh

Presidents North Carolina Gave the Nation. Sculptor Charles Keck created this statue, which honors Andrew Jackson, James Knox Polk, and Andrew Johnson. Image credit: N.C. Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, North Carolina has received the attention of both Barack Obama and John McCain. The state's 15 electoral votes are sure to be important in determining which man becomes the next president of the United States. But votes are not the only thing North Carolina has offered the nation. In the past, the Old North State has produced a number of influential political figures. North Carolina-born politicians have done much to impact the United States through the years. Here are brief sketches of two famous native sons.

Andrew Jackson

Nicknamed “Old Hickory” for his toughness, Andrew Jackson was the seventh president of United States. He was born in the Waxhaws region on the border of North and South Carolina in 1767. (Both states claim him.) Jackson's aunt, who assisted at his birth, said he was born at the house of George McCamie in present-day Union County, North Carolina.

Jackson moved west to what is now eastern Tennessee after receiving his law degree. The future president was not afraid to defend himself or his honor along this dangerous frontier. He even went so far as to kill a man in a duel for insulting his wife, Rachel. Jackson represented Tennessee in the United States House of Representatives and Senate. He served as a major general in the Tennessee militia during the War of 1812. His courage and skillful defense of the city of New Orleans against the British in that war made him a national hero.

Jackson's presidency began in 1829. Jackson did not shy away from conflict, and he challenged many powerful politicians in Congress. His aggressive leadership earned him the nickname “King Andrew I.”

President Jackson represented the will of the people, except when it came to American Indians. In 1830 he authorized the Indian Removal Act. Under this act, Native peoples gave up their lands east of the Mississippi River in exchange for land to the west. But many tribes refused to leave their homes and had to be removed by force. In 1838 the

Cherokee who had not moved were rounded up and marched to present-day Oklahoma. Their forced journey on foot became known as the Trail of Tears.

James Knox Polk

James Knox Polk was born in 1795 in Mecklenburg County. His family moved to Tennessee when he was 11. Polk was a sickly child. Because of this, his formal education was limited until he was 18. Despite a late start, Polk graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with honors in 1818. He returned to Tennessee after graduation, studied law, and became a successful attorney.

Polk entered politics by serving in the Tennessee legislature. He followed this with 14 years in the United States House of Representatives and one term as Tennessee's governor. While serving in Congress, Polk helped and supported his friend and fellow North Carolinian, Andrew Jackson. Polk even earned the nickname "Young Hickory" because of this support.

Polk won the presidential election of 1844 to become the 11th president of the United States. He believed in "Manifest Destiny," or the idea that the United States had the right to expand and take all the land in North America. Supporters of Manifest Destiny thought the country's only borders should be the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. President Polk added large amounts of land to the United States. He worked out an agreement with Great Britain for the Oregon Territory, an area that now includes the states of Washington and Oregon.

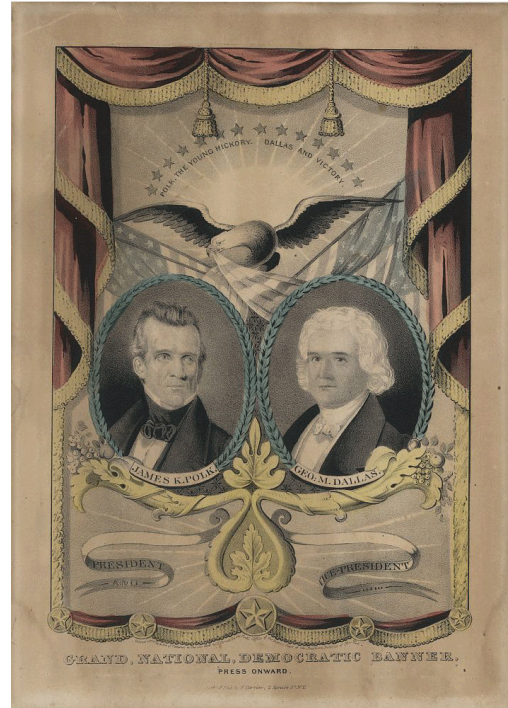


Photo caption: Polk campaign banner. Image credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

But President Polk also used less peaceful ways to gain land. In 1846 the United States went to war with Mexico over Texas. The United States wanted to annex Texas as a state, but Mexico claimed the land. Mexico made its claim even though Texas had been an independent republic for more than 10 years. When the fighting ended in 1848, tens of thousands of American and Mexican soldiers were dead. And through conquest and purchase, Texas, New Mexico, and California joined the nation.

James Knox Polk was tired and sick when his term ended in 1849. He died three months after leaving office.